DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 184 134 CS 205 445

AUTHOR Stallard, Charles K.
TITLE Writing Readiness: Perspectives on Learning to Write.
PUB DATE Mar 79
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the combined Annual Meeting of the Conference on English Education and the Secondary School English Conference (Pittsburgh, PA, March 15-18, 1979).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Development; *Concept Formation; Higher Education; *Readiness; Secondary Education; Teacher Effectiveness; Teaching Methods; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Composition Process

ABSTRACT

Writing readiness is defined in this paper as the skills and understandings necessary for minimum success in completing a writing task. The skills discussed are divided into three areas of need: to give students a clear, operational concept of the function and structure of composition that includes the concepts of paragraphs, sentences, controlling idea, subordination, organization, development, audience, and purpose; to teach students an effective problem solving strategy for the task of composing that includes searching cognitive resources through discussion or writing, reflecting on what has been written, selecting and organizing content under a controlling idea, and revising; and to help students develop a command of syntax and vocabulary through the intensive and extensive reading of good writing. Listed as necessary for designing a writing curriculum are the recognition that growth in writing is highly individualistic and occurs slowly, that experimentation with language can improve writing skill, that setting realistic and personal writing goals is essential, and that writing improvement does not occur in isolation. Three categories of instruction are recommended at all levels of schooling to meet students' needs for writing readiness: experience with writing using a variety of modes, audiences, subjects, and purposes; positive, developmental feedback; and directed writing activities that break the task of composing into manageable steps. (AEA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Charles K. Stallard
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED184134

CS205455

WRITING READINESS: PERSPECTIVES ON LEARNING TO WRITE

Charles K. Stallard
Old Dominion Unversity
Norfolk, Virginia

Writing readiness, as I have chosen to use the term (Stallard, 1977) is distinct from and should not be confused with reading readiness. The term reading readiness refers to conditions that are prerequisites to beginning basic instruction in reading. In other words, one needs these concepts and experiences before reading skill can be developed. I prefer to use the term writing readiness in a different way. Think of those skills and that comprehension necessary for a minimum of success in completing a writing task. That is, given the need to produce a composition, students must have at least these elements at their disposal if they are to have a reasonable chance of success. This is not to suggest that before students are asked to write or even before writing instruction is offered that we teach in isolation the elements classified under the requisites for writing readiness. Think instead of the total task of writing. Break that task down into the major items of knowledge, competence, concepts, or skills that must be used to complete the writing task and one has what is basic to the ability to write--prerequisite to a minimum competence in writing at least.

It is important to begin now to consider the concept of writing readiness because too much of what has gone in the way of curriculum in written compositon in the past has not afforded most students what they needed to develop as writers at the time that they most needed it. Teachers of writing have assumed far too much about the readiness of their student

writers when they have made assignments and when they have planned lessons and built curricula. The result has been that time has been wasted teaching facts about compositions when those facts have had no cognitive context to give them real or operational meaning. The result for the students has been that the time they have spent in writing classes listening to discussions of methods of paragraph development, sentence combining, or any of a host of other things talked about in the name of writing instruction has been wasted, and they have been confused and often frustrated.

All along, students have been trying to tell their teachers that they were confused, but teachers haven't heard them. For example, what is one of the most frequently asked questions when teachers give assignments to write? "How long do you want it to be?" Teachers chuckle or give some cute answer in frustration at being asked something so trivial. They wish that their students would worry about more substantial matters such as where to put commas, capital letters, or how to spell, but, no, they are only worried about how much they have to write! At least most teachers have interpreted the question that way. But that is not what students are asking at all. They are, instead, groping for something much more basic and needed in their attempt to write the composition assigned. They want and need to know more about what it is they are expected to do. They want and need to know what a composition really is; not just a definintion, but a clear and operational concpet of what compositions are, functionally and structurally. When one thinks about it, the only reason to ask how long a composition should be is because the writer doesn't have the foggiest notion about the function or structure of written compositions.

When students are faced with the task of writing compositions they have to draw upon whatever knowledge and experience they have. They know a few things ordinarily, but more often than not they lack a mature concept of what compositions are all about. They have seen written compositions in their reading material, and they know, for example, that they have words, sentences, and indented spaces scattered throughout. They may also remember that compositions have titles. The thing that really troubles them is that the compositions they have seen and read vary in length from a few paragraphs, even one paragraph for that matter, to several pages. Why they vary in length remains a mystery, so student writers are left to worry about what the teacher has in mind when he or she says "write a composition." Some may use what has been accepted by the teacher in the past as a rough indication and not bother to ask, but the doubt remains. In the end they give their teacher something like the following typical composition:

(1) A first page that has a title, an indented set of sentences and/or fragments, and one-half of a second set of sentences and/or fragments also indented;

(2) between one and two additional pages of sentences and/or fragments that may or may not have an indention here and there.

This production is probably accepted by the teacher who immediately commences to tell the student where he or she fell short in the task by generously marking spelling and transcriptive errors and by writing critical remarks in the margin. Teachers who are rigorous in this treatment of the typical student essay have been led to believe that they

are giving the best of writing instruction. I merely suggest that a student is not ready to write who lacks an operational concept of the function and structure of compositons.

Notice that the description of the typical composition offered above does not say that students write paragraphs. If they do not understand the concept of compositions, they cannot understand the nature and function of paragraphs. The concept of paragraph has only limited meaning outside the context of a more developed written discourse. Lacking an understanding of paragraphs, the student writer will indent at the beginning of his paper and one or two other times for visual effect, depending on the length of the paper. I am convinced that many students, in the process of their writing, have a nagging question in the back of their minds: "When do I indent again?" One of the next things the teaching profession needs is for someone to write a song entitled "It's Time to Indent Again." If set to some lively music, maybe the idea wil get across that teachers often assume too much about what their students understand and what they do not. Not having an operational concept of compositions also leaves students helpless in dealing with other related concepts such as controlling idea, subordination, organization, development, audience, and purpose to name a few.

Developing conceptual readiness to write requires a major shift in the way we organize instruction in writing. If one examines textbooks and curricula in writing it is easy to detect the traditional assumption that holds that there is an inherent logic to the progression from teaching about words, then sentences, and then paragraphs. These same texts and curricula hardly ever speak to the general nature and function of compositions. While organizing instruction on the basis of moving from the

small elements such as words and sentences to the larger one of paragraphs may seem logical, such an approach does not give the student a meaningful framework for developing operational concepts of these various elements. What is needed in place of the traditional logical or pseudo-logical organization of knowledge is a psychological organization that considers how the learner should utilize knowledge in the practice of composing written compositions. Simply stated, writing programs must begin early, as early as kindergarten, providing experience and instruction that affords experience with and development of the concept of COMPOSITION. Given that basic concept, the developing writer is then able to assimilate major subordinate concepts into a personally meaningful cognitive structure.

These subordinate concepts include but are not limited to the following:

CONTROLLING IDEA	SUBORDINATION
DEVELOPMENT	PARAGRAPH
SENTENCE	PURPOSE
AUDIENCE	COORDINATION

No doubt future research will reveal that there is a developmental order for introducing and teaching these concepts as well as identify other major concepts that developing writers must use in composing.

A second aspect of writing readiness lies in the area of effective problem solving strategy. The student who is asked to write a composition is faced with a complex and difficult cognitive task. Even the best writer often has difficulty. This second aspect of readiness to write has been called composing processes.

After doing a dissertation study that compared the writing behavior of good student writers to other student writers (Stallard, 1972), it became apparent to me that good writers have acquired more effective strategies for dealing with the task of writing. Using the observed behavior of these good and average writers, I have offered a cognitive theory of composing (Stallard, 1976) and translated the model of composing it affords into a learning activity packet that leads students through the process (Stallard, 1977).

Just as a base of operational concepts is needed for readiness to write, so is the ability and willingness to use effective composing processes. Briefly, an effective composing process is one that proceeds one step at a time through the cognitive tasks writing requires. Effective composing strategy divides the total task of writing into sequential and manageable subprocesses. In other words, an effective strategy is one wherein the student writer does not attempt to write a finished draft or even a finished rough draft immediately or in one setting.

There is not time enough here to present a cognitive theory of composing, so I must refer you to the literature on that subject, but based on cognitive theories of learning and of composing, the following general statements about composing processes can be made:

(1) The primary task facing the writer is the need to identify a controlling idea. It is the controlling idea that dictates the particular content of a composition. Paragraphs cannot be written until the essential nature of the message is known.

(2) At the beginning of the composing process, the writer seldom knows precisely what the controlling

idea will be. Too frequently the writer puts a title on a page and strings random ideas down the page underneath. Titles are seldom complete enough or specific enough to state the premise of a paper.

(3) The practice of asking students to prepare outlines ignores the fact that it is virtually impossible to organize and outline a concept that has not been clearly formulated in the writer's mind. Having a topic for a composition does not mean that the essence of the message that the writer will communicate has been conceptualized. That message, the controlling idea, comes from the process of writing and reflecting on what has been written until a controlling idea becomes apparent to the writer. Peter Elbow in his marvelous book Writing Without Teachers says it much better:

"This (think-write) idea of writing is backwards. That's why it causes so much trouble. Instead of a two-step transaction of meaning-into-language, think of writing as an organic, developmental process in which you start writing at the very beginning before you know your meaning at all... only at the end will you know what you want to say or the words to say it with. Meaning is not what you start out with but what you end up with." He calls this process one of growing and cooking a message; a way "...to end up thinking something you couldn't have started out thinking. (Elbow, 1973)

(4) An effective composing process, therefore, is more of a write-think-write process than a think-write process.

(5) An effective composing process is one in which the writer searches his or her cognitive structure for what he or she can say about the topic and puts this information into concrete form by writing, sometimes free writing, and then reflects on this raw material to see what the controlling idea might be. If a controlling idea is not apparent to the writer, more writing/free writing is needed.

(6) At some point in the free writing process, the writer must select a controlling idea; then develop some related or subordinate ideas to support the controlling idea. With that much of the content invented, the writer can commence to organize a rough draft and then submit it to a number of revision steps to produce a finished piece of writing.

(7) The cognitive tasks outlined here cannot be conducted simultaneously. For the student writer, and who is not a student when it comes to writing, these tasks must be separated into manageable steps.

This is not the composing process most students normally use, and it is difficult to bring them to the habit of using it regularly. Some of the major sub-processes of composing as suggested by cognitive theories of learnig include but are not limited to the following:

Cognitive Processes	Writing Behaviors That Reflect the Cognitive Processes	
SEARCHING	Free Writing Talk-Write Discussion Any Act of Writing	
REFLECTING	Reading What Has Been Written Recalling What Has Been Written	
SELECTING	Choosing Possible Controlling Ideas or Supporting Detail From All That Has Been "Invented"	
ORGANIZING	Manipulating the Order of Ideas That Have Been Selected In Order To Find An Effective Pattern	
REVISING	Content Order Mechanics Usage Style, etc.	The most effective revision also proceeds through one category at a time. For example, look for spelling errors; then; then, etc.

As in the case of conceptual readiness, these elements of procedural readiness are the obvious ones and others will no doubt be identified by research.

There is yet a third element of writing readiness--language. Unless a writer has command of syntax and vocabulary, language cannot be used to make a composition. Of course, students do have command of a language. The question raised by the concept of writing readiness relates to the appropriateness of contemporary student language for the writing task. Given the changes in our culture away from an orientation to the printed word to an orientation toward the electronic media, one must wonder if many students today have enough experience with the nuances and devices of written English to be able to deal with writing. There is cause to suspect that students today read less, are read to less often, and do far less writing of all types. If such is the case, readiness to write cannot be assumed at any level of schooling. Frequent writing and extensive and intensive reading of good writing are essential to developing a readiness to write.

Other dimensions of writing readiness no doubt operate in the development of writing competence. There is the matter of attitude toward self as writer and toward the personal value of writing and learning to write. Like the other areas of writing readiness outlined above, this affective dimension says to all teachers of writing that they must not assume that their students are ready to undertake the assignments they make just because they have earned passing marks in English or have reached a certain age. It is far safer to assume a more primitive state of innocence

in the matter and build writing programs developmentally from that point. Such a writing program would take at least the above mentioned elements of readiness to write as a starting point. In order to do so, a revision of our traditional view of how curricula in writing should be organized must occur, an organization that moves from the concept of the whole (a composition) to the subordinate concepts. Teachers of writing will also have to exhibit more patience in their approach to giving their students feedback about their writing. The process of composing is complex, and developing and integrating all the skills required will take time.

Once a teacher understands the basic needs of the developing writer, he or she can be intelligently selective of curriculum content and instructional strategy. In being selective, the following points might be kept in mind:

(1) Growth in writing is a highly individualistic process. This is true of all other areas of human growth and development, and there is no reason to assume a difference here. The implication for instruction is that approaches that treat large groups of students in the same way at the same time are bound to have limited results.

(2) While many research studies dealing with the effectiveness of writing instruction have failed to show significant improvement in writing, improvement may occur over longer periods of time than the six, ten, or fifteen week interval teachers and researchers usually allow. Growth in writing occurs slowly.

(3) Risk taking, trying new constructs as one writes, and so stretching one's command of language by experimentation are important for growth in writing skill. The student must be willing to take risks, and any teacher behavior that inhibits such behavior is counterproductive to the goals of writing instruction.

(4) Goal setting is an important process in the development of student writers. Writing skill is a complex of sub-skills, and the task often seems insurmountable to students. Goal setting that is within reach of a student helps to create the conditions necessary for improvement especially when the goals are personalized and concrete.

(5) Writing improvement does not occur in isolation. Merely assigning themes and grading them is insufficient instruction for most students to develop their writing skill. Not only do students need the basic concepts, effective composing strategies, and a wide body of knowledge about language and transcribing, but they also need to extend their general linguistic abilities by using language to explore, define, and master the other disciplines. There has been a decline of writing as a teaching method.

With these factors in mind, it is easy to see that teachers need an extensive collection of instructional strategies. It is time to stop looking for that magical method that will solve all our problems for us and time to start applying what we have already learned about human growth and development, language acquisition and development, and cognitive functioning. The following three basic categories of instruction are needed at all levels of schooling in order to meet the full range of need writing readiness commands.

The first category could be called simply--EXPERIENCE. This means more frequent writing using all modes of discourse, writing for many audiences about many subjects for different purposes. The result of such experience should be increased ease in the use of written English, more confidence in one's potential to learn to write, and an increase in writing vocabulary and syntax. Under this category there are virtually countless strategies a teacher can use. Taking dictation, paraphrasing writing of others, incomplete composition exercises, autobiography, letters to the editor, and so forth. Just remember that your instructional goals

under this category are limited to promoting risk taking behavior and providing experience with written English.

The second category is that of DEVELOPMENTAL FEEDBACK. Such feedback frowns on the practice of marking every possible error in a student paper and requires that the teacher understand the hierarchy of need of any developing writer. In other words, such instruction considers what a given student needs to know first, second, etc. and supplies just that information in a focused and understandable way. Such feedback should be in positive terms, limited to the immediate needs of the individual writer, and be consistent throughout the school program. It will require that we put our heads together in departmental meetings and discuss what good writing is all about so that we do not contradict each other from year to year as my own teachers did in high school and college. A hierarchy of need probably begins with the basic concepts and moves to the various composing processes and then to missing bits of knowledge about usage and the mechanics of transcription.

The third category of instruction can be called DIRECTED WRITING ACTIVITY. In essence, using these techniques, we lead a student writer through the composing process one step at a time. We break the complex task of composing into manageable steps by limiting the scope of our assignments. As students develop more skill they can be more independent in the choice of writing topics and the process of composing they choose to use.

These three categories become progressively more focused as a student

moves through a developmental writing program. Writing experience is a broad category. Developmental feedback is more focused and looks at major categories of need, and directed writing activity is precisely focused on specific skills or identified deficiencies. The entire sequence of instruction is designed to provide both support and motivation for developing student writers. There is nothing inherently new in any of the techniques. This is a commonsense approach and the only remarkable thing about it is that we haven't taught this way all along.

******

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Elbow, Peter. Writing Without Teachers. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Stallard, Charles. "An Analysis of the Writing Behavior of Good Student Writers," Research in the Teaching of English. Volume VIII, Summer, 1974.

Stallard, Charles. "Composing: A Cognitive Process Theory," College Composition and Communication, May, 1976.

Stallard, Charles. "The Process of Composing: A Learning Activity Packet," North Carolina English Teacher, Fall, 1977.

Stallard, Charles. "Writing Readiness: A Developmental View," Language Arts, October, 1977.